



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

POLICY BRIEF: IRAN

October 2019

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

Iran Policy Brief: Increased Persecution of Iran's Baha'i Community in 2019

By Scott Weiner, Policy Analyst

Background

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a theocratic authoritarian state that enforces a unique interpretation of Ja'afrī Shi'a Islam. Individual Iranians, however, ascribe to a wide range of religions and beliefs. Since December 2017, a wave of protest activity in Iran has put pressure on the government to deliver economic, social, and political reforms. Simultaneously, the United States' maximum pressure campaign has put additional stress on Iran's leadership. In response to this domestic and international pressure, Iran has increased its persecution of minority religious communities. Although this persecution has impacted several groups, it has targeted the Baha'i community with particular fervor. The Baha'i faith originated in Iran in the 19th century and today is the country's second largest religion. Iran's government, however, considers the over 300,000 Iranian Baha'is part of a "deviant sect of Islam" because their faith recognizes divine revelation subsequent to the Prophet Mohammed, whom Islam considers the final revelation from God or "seal of the prophets." The faith's administrative headquarters in Haifa, Israel, also feeds the Iranian government's suspicion that Baha'is are spying on behalf of Israel, though its location was not by choice. The faith's founder, Baha'u'llah, was imprisoned and exiled throughout the region during Ottoman rule in the 1800s: from Iran and Iraq to Turkey and historic Palestine. Baha'u'llah died while under house arrest in 1892 in Acre, Palestine. It was his family and followers who established the administrative center of the faith there, more than a half century before 1948, the year the state of Israel was born.

In the 10 years following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iranian government executed [more than 200 Baha'is](#) while it tortured and imprisoned thousands of others. The situation has only gotten worse in the 21st century: between 2009 and 2019, more than [1,000](#) Baha'is were arbitrarily arrested on the basis of their faith, many by order of the revolutionary courts that Iran established after 1979 to fulfill the goals of the Islamic Revolution. In its [2019 Annual Report](#), USCIRF noted that Iranian Baha'is had been subject in 2018 to arrest, the shuttering of their businesses, and denial of matriculation or graduation from Iranian universities. In one particularly concerning case, government authorities exhumed the remains of a deceased Baha'i woman from her grave in Kerman and removed them from the cemetery in which they were interred.



A [July 2019 report](#) by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman, demonstrates that the government of Iran has continued its systematic persecution of Bahá'ís. At the beginning of 2019, [97 Bahá'ís](#) were arbitrarily detained in Iran. USCIRF is particularly concerned by a spate of arrests of Bahá'ís in that country as well as the targeting of local government officials who have advocated for their release.

Ongoing Religious Freedom Limitations

In 2019, Iran continued to [harass](#) the Bahá'í community through state-sponsored media. Since 2014, more than [26,000](#) pieces of anti-Bahá'í media have appeared on official or semi-official Iranian television channels. On July 20, the social media platform [Twitter suspended several accounts linked to Iranian state media](#)—including the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), Mehr, and Young Journalists Club (YJC), which is run by the state broadcaster Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)—over their coordinated and targeted harassment of Bahá'ís. The propagation of such anti-Bahá'í material jeopardizes the safety of Iran's Bahá'í community by spreading false information and inflammatory rhetoric about them among the Iranian public.

Iran has also arrested scores of Bahá'ís in 2019, and several Bahá'ís who had been detained in previous years remain in prison. These detainees face trial for alleged and spurious crimes that include “[assembly and collusion against national security](#),” “[insulting the sacred](#),” and “[propaganda against the state](#),” all of which carry the penalty of years in prison. Over a two-week period in January, [32 Bahá'ís were reportedly summoned](#) to and interrogated at the Karaj Intelligence Office. Members of Iran's police force and intelligence services have raided Bahá'í homes and offices and confiscated property from them. In July, Iranian security forces raided a nursing home managed by Bahá'ís and [threatened to evict](#) some of the elderly tenants. In each of these cases, Iran's government targeted the individuals in question on the basis of their membership in the Bahá'í community. Defenders of the Iranian Bahá'í community have themselves been subject to state persecution. Shiraz city councilman Mehdi Hajati, who is not himself Bahá'í, was jailed for 10 days in September 2018 and banned from the council for [4.5 months](#) over tweets expressing support for two Bahá'í constituents who had been detained. In June 2019 he was [arrested again](#) and the Shiraz Appeals Court sentenced him to one year in Abel Abad prison. Following his prison term, councilman Hajati is subject to [two years in exile](#). Iran has also prosecuted a member of the Isfahan city council, Mehdi Moghaddari, for posting messages on Twitter and Instagram in support of councilman Hajati, resulting in separate [six-month](#) and [two-year sentences](#) as well as a [six-month](#) ban from the Islamic City Council of Isfahan.

Iran's persecution of the Bahá'í community directly contravenes its obligation under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to ensure citizens' freedom of religion and belief. Bahá'ís in Iran are entitled to freedom from persecution by the government and from harassment through state-sponsored media. In addition, the export of Bahá'í persecution to [Yemen](#), where Iran projects influence among Houthi forces, is similarly a violation of the right of Bahá'ís to freedom of religion or belief. As such, it is incumbent upon the U.S. government to speak out and act on behalf of Iran's persecuted Bahá'í minority.

Examples of 2019 Incidents

January 4 – Yekta Fahandej Sa'di, a Bahá'í woman, was [sentenced to 11 years and 9 months](#) in prison and expelled from Payame Noor University in Shiraz.

January 5 – A computer accessory business owned by a Bahá'í man, Farshid Demi, was [closed in Birjand](#).

January 6 – [32 Bahá'ís were summoned and interrogated](#) at the Karaj Intelligence Office over a two-week period.

January 9 – Yazd resident and Bahá'í Iranian Moein Mohammadi was [arrested](#) in that city.

January 28 – A Bahá'í man, Farzad Rouhani Manshadi, was also [arrested](#) in Yazd. His house was searched and some of his belongings confiscated.

April 15 – Isfahan City Council member Mehdi Moghaddari was [suspended](#) from his seat for six months in part for supporting Shiraz City Council member Mehdi Hajati, who had advocated for the release of two Bahá'í constituents.

April 28 – The First Branch of the Appeals Court in Kerman [held an appeals hearing](#) for four Bahá'ís sentenced to five years in prison in 2017; the case is ongoing.

June 2 – Shiraz City Council member Mehdi Hadjati was arrested and [began a one-year prison sentence](#) for seeking the release of Bahá'í prisoners.

June 9 – Intelligence and police officers [raided 11 Bahá'i homes and offices](#) in Shahin Shahr.

June 27 – The Tehran Revolutionary Court [sentenced](#) Bahá'í Iranian Negin Tadrishi to five years in prison for "assembly and collusion against national security."

July 11 – The Birjad Court in Southern Khorestan [sentenced nine Bahá'ís](#) to years in prison.

July 12 – Two Bahá'í women who were previously released on bail were again summoned and faced new charges. One was accused of blasphemy ("[insulting the sacred](#)") and the other of "forging a decree."

July 14 – The Fars Appeals Court [acquitted](#) Bahá'í Iranian Yekta Fahandeshadi of "propaganda against the state" and "acting against security" after her sentencing by a Revolutionary Court. She had been arrested on several prior occasions.

July 15 – Isfahan City Council member Mehdi Moghaddari was [sentenced to two years in prison](#) for defending another city council member who expressed support for two detained Bahá'ís on social media.

July 20 – Twitter [suspended](#) several Iranian news agencies' accounts—including ones linked to IRNA, Mehr, and YJC—for their harassment of Bahá'ís.

August 3 – Moein Mohammadi was [sentenced](#) to one year of electronic monitoring of his movements and restriction on his ability to leave Yazd for "proselytizing" and spreading "propaganda against the regime." Agents of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence also [arrested](#) two Bahá'í men, Ruhollah Zibaie and Abolfazl Ansari.

Conclusion and Recommendations for U.S. Policy

While the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran is a longstanding and well-documented problem, the recent spate of arrests and harassment indicates a concerning downward trend. As the Iranian government faces continued domestic and international pressure, it is likely to persist in its targeting of religious minorities, including Bahá'ís, on the basis of their religious beliefs. The U.S. government should continue to speak out [publicly](#) and frequently at all levels about these and other severe [religious freedom abuses](#) in Iran, and [highlight](#) the need for the international community to [hold Iran's authorities accountable](#) for violating the religious freedom of all its citizens, including Bahá'ís.

Regarding the specific challenges facing the Iranian Bahá'í community, the administration should:

- Impose asset freezes and visa bans on Iranian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of the Bahá'í community's religious freedom. Relevant sanctions instruments include the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and related executive orders.



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- Press for and work toward securing the release of all Baha'is in Iran detained on the basis of their religious beliefs.
- Partner with European allies to use a wide array of advocacy, diplomacy, and targeted sanctions to pressure Iran to end its persecution of the Baha'i community; and
- Engage with civil society organizations in the United States and Europe that advocate on behalf of Baha'is in Iran and include them in U.S.-government hosted public events highlighting religious freedom.

The U.S. Congress should:

- Re-authorize and ensure implementation of the Lautenberg Amendment, which aids persecuted Iranian religious minorities, including Baha'is, who seek refugee status in the United States.

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